Staggers Stakes All On CBS Showdown

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Associated Press

Harley O. Staggers, the silver-crowned West Virginia congressman pressing for a contempt citation against CBS, is investing a lifetime of personal prestige in that single vote.

This ex-sheriff from Mineral County is standing with an unanswered subpoena in hand.

He calls the Columbia Broadcasting System's refusal to comply with his Commerce Committee's order "a grave challenge to the constitutional right to legislate," and demands CBS and its president be held in contempt of Congress.

Staggers is pressing to see untelevised material involving "The Selling of the Pentagon," a CBS documentary critical of military public relations spending practices. CBS declines to supply it, citing first Amendment protection.

Outcome in Doubt

As a courtesy, fellow legislators usually go along with a committee's contempt recommendation. But the House is restless about implications of this unprecedented one dealing with news activities of a television network. Some insiders say Staggers, who wants to determine whether editing of the documentary left false impressions, is risking an equally unprecedented rejection.

A vote is expected today. Staggers, 63, ex-football coach at Potomac State College in Keyser, W. Va., paces the congressional cloakrooms pleading for help to win this most-publicized contest of his political life.

But those same cloakrooms are tense with dissent from colleagues on Stagger's committee who openly challenge using this case in what could be a landmark suit on congressional authority over broadcast journalism.

Standing on Dignity

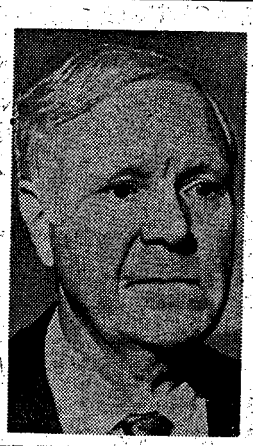
"Congress stands to lose much if it presents the question of its authority to the courts in the least appealing fact situation, and a case in which Congress stands largely upon its dignity is the least appealing one to the courts," said a minority report by the 13 dissidents on the committee.

Yet Staggers, a men's Bible-class teacher at Keyser Methodist Church, says: "Although it may be an unpopular posion at this time, someone must stand up for the people. He reports his mail flows with encouragement "from people in all walks of life from all sections of the country."

Democrat Staggers, elected in 1948 and re-elected 11 times to become dean of West Virginia congressmen, said when he became head of the Commerce Committee in 1966:

"We are missing a great opportunity to use (television) as a tool to strengthen the moral fiber of the nation and to help uplift the national ideals. I don't believe in tight regulation of anybody. The responsibility lies with the people who originate the programs."

CBS argues that press freedom in the Constitution protects broadcast journalists from legislative surveillance. But Staggers insists he is making no challenge to the first Amendment.



REP. HARLEY O. STAGGERS
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